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Manufactured Scarcity: Countering Artificial Information Vacuums through Grassroot Risk Communications during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only revealed medical disparities between countries in terms of access to vaccines but has also unveiled huge rifts in knowledge and information flow regarding the pandemic and vaccination amongst the general public. With this in view, we will interrogate how grassroot communicators and social networking sites have worked alongside each other to disseminate information about the pandemic that counters the narratives provided by the state. As scholars of rhetoric, we intend to trace the ways in which professional communication and state disinformation produce information vacuums amongst citizens while also illuminating how localized resistance and social justice activism taking place through coalition building on social media, can disrupt and dismantle deficiency narratives and furthermore provide grassroot material support to those in dire need. In other words, drawing upon Ding's Critical Contextualized Methodology, the proposed chapter will present a case study on Nepal by incorporating the petite narratives--after Lyotard--of "non-western cultural actors" (Ding, 2014, p. 30) in order to study the process and impact of alternative information flows during the time of risk and disaster, especially during the ongoing global pandemic.

Keywords: digital rhetoric; grassroots communication; professional communication

Introduction

In a world capsized by the COVID-19 pandemic, the development and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines as early as December 2020 brought a shimmer of hope that we could return to normal. Unlike in natural disasters where the immediate aftermath necessitates regional and local responses, the pandemic had an unprecedented global effect. Citizens worldwide realized the need for effective leadership and governance for public health and information justice. Not only did the pandemic expose the fragility of nation-state governments, but it also exposed the World Health Organization's (WHO) lack of "preparedness and response" (Velásquez, 2021, p. 2) to the pandemic. The pandemic generated a sense of urgency to create a united global response to disaster and build collective public health measures that would mitigate the harm caused by the pandemic. While national governments' reactions to the pandemic "have been based on improvisation" (de Soto, 2021, p. 2), collective actions taking place locally at the community level also began to sprout up to provide resources during the pandemic. Local responses to the pandemic were critical when bureaucratic labyrinths and geopolitical relations created delays in delivering timely responses—including providing accurate information in real-time. In crises, access to an authentic and timely flow of information to the public becomes crucial in "shaping people's behavior in emergency situations" (Abbas, 2021, p. 551). This was highlighted during the pandemic when the United Nations argued that the pandemic was "accompanied by an 'infodemic,' which has created mistrust, stigmatization and increased the spread of misinformation" (United Nations Office, 2020). When most of the globe went into lockdown, online social media platforms provided space for community members to assemble and utilize communication tactics to address the vacuum of information and resources.

By drawing on two distinct examples from Nepal, this article demonstrates how online community members assembled to form a coalition to deliver timely information about resources. Written during the winter of 2021, after vaccine rollouts¹, we also explore various strategies grassroots communicators have adopted to mitigate the challenges posed by pandemic and vaccine injustice, specifically in Nepal. This article will begin by analyzing how global political power remains under the influence and control of a few Western players who put forth deficiency narratives against non-Western cultures, referring to them as "incapable" of taking charge in a crisis. We first explain how Western countries create vaccine scarcity through claims about Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) to contextualize that the disasters grassroots communicators are responding to are man-made. We then use data from newspaper articles and social media platforms to weave stories about pockets of resistance born out of grassroots communities to tackle Nepal's global pandemic and infodemic. Our analysis of this data is not systematic or generalizable; we want to be clear that this is not a case study but rather a collection of different examples that we have compiled to trace the influence of social media on disaster response undertaken by grassroots communicators. This article highlights the necessity of examining social media tools' agentic possibilities to construct and shape disaster responses alongside grassroots communicators and offers alternative avenues for community-oriented resistance and collaboration.

¹As we were finishing this piece, the Omicron COVID-19 variant exploded around the world invigorating calls to remove intellectual property rights on vaccine know-how blueprints. COVID-19 variants, and recurring COVID-19 surge outbreaks speak to the necessity of ending TRIPs (Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights) agreements around life-saving medicines and the importance of recognizing the neoliberal and capitalistic ideological underpinnings of risk and professional communication during a global pandemic. The first wave of COVID-19 occurred in March 2020 during the first round of global lockdowns. The April 2021 delta variant of COVID-19 constituted the second wave of COVID-19 and lockdowns across the world. The third wave occurred when the Omicron COVID-19 variant in November and January of 2021-2022 caused a spike in cases globally. As we finish revising this article, we are experiencing an apparent fourth wave of COVID-19 cases spiking around the world.

With this in view, we not only explore the effects of the politics of IPRs and patent rights of COVID-19 life-saving vaccines but also rhetorically analyze the stance of Bill Gates. His octopus-like tentacles' grip on Western countries' institutions continues to pose challenges for acquiring vaccine justice, especially in the developing world. In addition to addressing social justice approaches to technical communication (Walton, Moore, Jones, 2019; Walton and Agboka, 2021), we interrogate transnational grassroots online communication to underscore the necessity of further study in technical and professional communication (TPC) of transnational rhetorics in a globalized world to better realize the differences between social justice rhetoric from the ground-up and the intentional circulation of myths that reinforce colonial tropes about racial "Others." Specifically, we discuss Nepali citizens' use of Twitter and Viber to obtain and allocate COVID-19 resources as an example of immaterial labor in the face of circulating deficiency narratives about knowledge production in non-Western countries. We propose that analyzing sites of immaterial labor located in non-Western countries—in this case, Nepal—can teach the TPC field additional approaches for utilizing a social justice² framework as well as demonstrate grassroots and crowdsourced resistance to deficiency narratives created by the West about the ineptitude of non-Western countries to combat the virus.

Bill Gates' Rhetoric

In April 2021, while the second wave of COVID-19 cases in India stunned the world, Bill Gates—the co-chair and trustee of the Gates Foundation, which has invested in the research and development of the COVID-19 vaccine—was asked if he was up for removing intellectual property rights (IPRs) restrictions on COVID-19 vaccines in order to increase production and access to the vaccine outside the US and the EU. In response to this question, during an interview with Sky News (2021), Bill Gates replied that he did not support sharing vaccine development blueprints with other countries. To explain his reasoning, Gates said, "Well, there's only so many vaccine factories in the world, and people are very serious about the safety of vaccines. And so moving something that had never been done—moving a vaccine, say, from a [Johnson & Johnson] factory into a factory in India—it's novel—it's only because of our grants and expertise that can happen at all" (Sky News, 2021). Gates' rhetoric reflects larger claims about non-Western knowledge production and intellectual property. Gates' claim positions safe vaccines as antithetical to vaccine production in India, with the presumed assumption being, by extension, most non-Western countries. Gates' attempt at pointing to the novelty of expanding the development of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine from factories in America to factories in India is not only false, but it also works rhetorically to question progress, development, and knowledge production in India and again, by extension non-Western countries. In other words, Gates' rhetoric perpetuates deficiency narratives about non-Western countries (Agboka, 2012; Ding and Savage, 2013; Sun, 2012).

Bill Gates' assertion that the non-West is "incapable" of manufacturing vaccines describes them as the racialized "Other" in a manner that claims not only Gates' authority over them but also delegitimizes their resources claiming that a paternal presence/guidance is needed to rescue them, giving credence to exceptionalist arguments about Western countries and Western knowledge production. As a form of epistemic violence (Spivak, 2003), Gates' rhetorical maneuvers reconjure tropes about the racialized "Other" and knowledge production in non-Western countries. Edward Said (1978) describes this reconjuring in terms of Orientalism and The Orient. Homi

² We use plural forms of social justice to include vaccine justice, information justice, medical and health-care justice, food justice and many more.

Bhabha (1985) critiques how Western knowledge functions as a signifier of authority that reinscribes colonial differences and power hierarchies through archaic images or identity associations. It is critical to grapple with how Gates positions American private corporations as exceptional compared to non-Western countries and corporations to understand the colonial legacies that influence contemporary professional communication that function as a form of disinformation.

Resonances about non-Western countries that paint them as barbaric and primitive are heard strongly, and they shape and orient how human beings perceive their position in the world, distinguish other human beings' position in the world, and the position of the nation-state in the world. These sentiments function as ideoscapes (Appadurai, 1990) that create social narratives about development and progress in non-Western countries through the rhetoric of American exceptionalism; they are also observed in the rhetoric of "saving" Islamic women from Muslim men—like Spivak once poignantly presented as "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (p. 93)—and in the rhetoric of vaccine development. Ideoscapes are "concatenations of images... directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements... composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview" (Appadurai, 1990, p. 331). These narratives about progress and development, heroism, safety, and knowledge all rely on deeply racialized discourses that uphold the capitalist system. They are carried through time and space to reinforce ideas about the "Other," to continually reinforce Western countries' exceptionalism and intellect.

If Gates can continue to push the untrue belief that countries in the non-West are incapable of producing their own knowledge or contributing to the scientific community while performatively arguing—as a philanthropist—for vaccine equity, Gates can defend his wealth, which he accumulates through intellectual property while gaining cultural wealth through his ability to position himself as a philanthropist. This is critical for discerning how neoliberal ideologies about the free marketplace that underpin patent agreements like TRIPs create the conditions for vaccine inequities. The same patent agreements that allowed Gates to trademark the computer software that Gates' empire was built on are the same patent agreements that "bar African governments from buying AIDs, malaria, and tuberculosis medicine at cheap market prices" (Ahn quoting Palast, 2017, p. 72). Gates uses these patent agreement arguments to build wealth off of computer software. Then, in turn, when those patent agreements cause inequities in other parts of the world, Gates can donate to mitigating the inequities he directly contributes to producing³ through the organizations he invests in.

Assetization and Intellectual Property Rights

Gates uses IPRs to situate intellectual property as an element of assetization. Specifically, he uses intellectual property to justify why vaccine know-how cannot be provided to individual countries and companies in the developing world. As discussed above, this justification only convinces others that intellectual property may be a legitimate barrier to vaccine justice because of underlying assumptions about non-Western knowledge. As vaccines were developed, the underlying belief was that global citizens would have equal access to vaccination regardless of the sites and sources of their production. However, in an era featuring an economy tarnished by the pandemic, the production of the vaccine emerged as a hot new market product with high global demand. The capitalistic urge to exploit life-saving vaccines by turning them into assets combined with

³For more on this, please see Didier Fassin's "Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life" and Linsey McGoey's *No Such Thing as a Free Gift: The Gates Foundation and The Price of Philanthropy*.

TRIPs trade agreements resulted in blocked vaccine distribution to non-Western countries and the hoarding of vaccine doses by the West.

Things become assets when they are in demand and producers/manufacturers have a monopoly in the market or are protected by a patent and IPRs; “knowledge, creative, or data assets (e.g., intellectual property rights or IPRs) have been legally instituted to give owners both exclusion rights to the use of the asset itself and to the use of any copies derived from the asset” (Birch & Muniesa, 2020, p. 17). Assetization becomes “something whose control” may warrant “future economic benefits” (Birch & Muniesa, 2020). Thus, access to the vaccine and its IPR/blueprint holds much power over those also interested in producing the vaccines in other parts of the world. This process of assetization does not exist in a vacuum. It entails analysis of “cultural metaphors and political-economic trends” (Birch & Muniesa, 2020, p. 18), as well as the development of techno-industries and advancements made by technocrats such as Bill Gates’ contributions to fields like biomedicine. An understanding of IPRs and assetization as a way of producing a monoculture of knowledge speaks to neoliberal ideologies like hyper-individualism and the necessity of a free market (Shiva, 2001). These ideologies operate as ideoscapes that frame how Western citizens understand the primacy and necessity of IPRs, informing why Gates’ justifications for withholding IPRs work effectively. These neoliberal ideoscapes affirm colonial legacies and argue for a hyper-individualistic worldview asserted through calls for intellectual property protection, recalling tropes of the solitary genius and narratives about American paternalism (Holmes, 2010).

Up to this point, we have recognized that deficiency narratives (Ding, 2020), like the one articulated above in our analysis of Bill Gates’ rhetoric, limit attempts for transnational responses to global issues through policies like the TRIPS agreement that bears material consequences for human bodies. These material consequences include manufactured vaccine scarcity that puts millions of people’s lives at risk of exposure to a deadly virus. Given COVID-19’s material impact on the body, we stress the importance of a materialist approach to analyzing the immaterial labor produced by grassroots communicators during the pandemic. Moreover, we emphasize the necessity of countering deficiency narratives through alternative/unofficial narratives that highlight local resistance movements and responses to neoliberal capitalism. As technical and professional communication has become increasingly concerned with social justice-oriented rhetorics (Walton, 2016; Sun, 2020; Rose and Walton, 2015), our article maintains that a social justice-oriented approach to TPC research is necessary and pertinent. Taking this point further, we highlight the necessity of examining grassroots communication, community-oriented mutual aid, and local resistance and response to disasters, especially given the increasing failure of the state and governmental agencies to respond effectively and efficiently to disasters. Examining disaster responses on social media offers a generative site of analysis to understand how social media networks enable participants to communicate and collaborate quickly during disasters and crises through a network of various social media tools.

Research Design and Methodology

Taking up Ding’s (2014) critical contextualized methodology, we explore tipping points during the COVID-19 pandemic to discern the petite narratives (or subjugated knowledge) that emerge to counter the grand narratives or ideologies propagated by Western countries. We analyze these specific tipping points to better comprehend risk communication and responses to the global pandemic in non-Western countries, especially as they function in direct response to deficiency narratives propagated by Western mediascapes and ideoscapes (Appadurai, 1990). Like Ding, we

insist on the importance of looking into alternative/unofficial narratives to explore global events and transnational communication among grassroots communicators. Ding (2014) writes,

Critical contextualized methodology gives equal voice to Western and non-Western countries through the acknowledgment of the multifaceted, complicated, and interactive nature of global events. In addition, it promotes a multivocal listening game, as advocated by Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, and pays as much attention to petite narratives and subjugated knowledge as to grand narratives. (p. 30)

With this in view, we used the critical contextualized methodology to identify and examine how grassroots communicators used social media networks and texting apps to gather material supplies and resources. We located two tipping points based on the time-space axis and key players we identified (Ding, 2014). The first tipping point occurred on April 25, 2021, when Bill Gates interviewed with Sky News, arguing that changing IPR law would not help increase vaccine access across the world. The second tipping point began on April 29, 2021, when the second round of lockdowns began in Nepal during the Delta variant surge. These tipping points were identified after examining various other key players simultaneously involved in discussions around vaccine justice and COVID-19 in non-Western countries, including the Biden administration, COVAX, Nepali media organizations, the WTO, and signatories of the “TRIPS COVID-19 Solution” presented to the WTO by the South African and Indian government. We also considered various events taking place during the second round of COVID-19 lockdowns due to the variant, including discussions about TRIPs, the safety of vaccines like AstraZeneca and Johnson and Johnson, and vaccine hoarding and access. These conversations and discussions were collected from various sources, news media, and social media sites. Table 1 provides a few examples of key players we identified during the second round of lockdown.

Table 1. Contextualizing Our Tipping Points

Levels	Key Players and Actions	Spatial Axis	Temporal Axis
National	U.S.: Biden Administration announces Americans have received 200 million vaccines	North America	Late April 2021
International	Bill Gates opposes sharing IPRs	Global	Late April 2021
National	Nepal: Nationwide Second Lockdown	Regional	Late April 2021
National	Nepal: Social Media Grassroot risk communication	Regional/Transnational	
International	WTO: revised TRIPs waiver originally presented to WTO by the South African and Indian government and later signed by other governments	Global	Late May 2021

Moving beyond an overview of the key players involved in the event and an analysis of time-space axis, Ding (2014) argues for the importance of studies that “examine not only key texts and local contexts of events but also the ways primary actors negotiate with one another to solve problems” (p. 41). With this in mind, we moved to answer the following questions:

- “How did the key players interact with one another? Through what means? What media?” (Ding, 2014, p. 38).

- “What kind of official and unofficial knowledges were created during the event? By whom? For what purpose?” (Ding, 2014, p. 38).
- “How did the contexts influence the way the event under discussion was constructed in various cultural and institutional sites?” (Ding, 2014, p. 38).

Much of the data we considered was borrowed from social media platforms like Twitter and Viber group chat. We identified various actors on Twitter who were using the platform to talk against Gates’ rhetoric of deficiency narratives about non-Western countries. We identified various organizations and coalitions that were formed to procure supplies and medical care for Nepali citizens, such as COVIDNepal, COVID Alliance for Nepal, and NepalCOVIDInfoX. Given the difference in power that Gates wields compared to grassroots organizations, utilizing a power-knowledge framework allowed us to expand our analysis further (Ding, 2014). It provided us with the space to interrogate the power dynamic between interactions among key players, digital social networks, and different news media organizations to understand how ideoscapes about Western countries and non-Western countries circulate and with what content. A power-knowledge framework that looks beyond the nation-state and technocratic actors allowed for unofficial and alternative labor produced by grassroots communicators to emerge within our tipping point analysis. Examining how differences in power and agentic possibility influenced the event provides us with a frame for thinking through local-level resistance movements and organizations and grassroots communication.

We adopted Ding’s approach to immaterial labor to examine the labor produced by grassroots responses to the pandemic. Ding (2019) argues that combining social justice and immaterial labor theories allows the creation of a heuristic to

help marginalized groups explore possible strategic entry points to challenge unjust practices and policies: by using language and rhetoric to organize communicative labor and affective labor, disenfranchised groups can build ad hoc alliances and mobilize collective intervention to improve process control and to promote international justice (p. 272).

We apply this definition of immaterial labor to detect, recover, and rhetorically listen to the works of grassroots communicators in Nepal during the pandemic, specifically during the second wave—beginning in late April 2021. By examining immaterial labor, we demonstrate how grassroots communicators utilized the entry points created and assembled by the interactions between human users and social media tools to circulate and distribute information in response to the immediacy required after a disaster or crisis takes place, especially when state and governmental agencies refuse to respond effectively to the needs of local communities.

Ding (2019) defines immaterial labor through three types of social justice “distributive, procedural, and interactional” (p. 264). For the purposes of our case study, we are interested in interactional justice, which “highlights the quality of communication practices by emphasizing the need for adequate and truthful information (information justice) as well as respectful sharing of such information (interpersonal justice)” (Ding, 2019, p. 264). Interactional justice elucidates how grassroots communicators worked against deficiency narratives about non-Western countries. In an attempt to counter an absence of information about the pandemic and vaccines, grassroots communicators crowdsourced, distributed, and circulated information that had material consequences for sick patients. Utilizing an interactional justice framework through which social media participants collected data, validated data, and circulated information, it becomes clear that

grassroots communicators were effectively able to leverage their power to “develop collective rhetorical agency” that allowed them to “launch their alternative political projects to push for collaborative intervention, social coordination, and policy change” (Ding, 2019, p. 267). Interactional justice looks at what information is being spread and how that information is being spread. Ding’s theorization of interactional justice provides a framework for considering the various connections and multiple technologies employed within Potts’ (2013) analytical framework. Importantly, it allows for an understanding of how alliances and organizations formed in response to a disaster were able to “build ad hoc alliances and mobilize collective intervention to improve process control and to promote interactional justice” (Ding, 2019, p. 272) through the distribution and circulation of life-saving information. Importantly, born from neoliberal vaccine scarcity and state and government failure, these ad hoc alliances and organizations collaborated and crowdsourced information using various social media networks and tools. Through hashtags, collaborative documents, and infographics, organizations could crowdsource and distribute information about COVID-19 resources and data on available hospital beds and oxygen tanks.

In crises like these, actor-network theory offers a way of considering the vast number of actors involved in collaborative engagement with social media technologies. Actor-network theory considers the actors at work in distributing and validating information on social media networks. In particular, actor-network theory allows us to consider how these various actors, including hashtags, external sites, retweets, social media and messaging apps, and users come together to “creat[e] assemblages of relations specific to an individual act or broader event and forming a collective, referred to as an ‘actant’” (Potts quoting Latour, 2013, p. 25). Like Potts, we argue that actor-network theory provides a framework for understanding the material effects of each actor within a given assemblage: “tracing how actors form networks to exchange content is an important part of this framework. Being able to pinpoint the many stages of that process is essential to understanding how this work takes place” (Potts, 2013, p. 26). Our analysis clarifies the importance of considering how humans circulate information in online spaces and how nonhuman technological tools like retweeting influence the circulation of that information. Especially during a disaster when actors need to disperse life-saving information quickly and efficiently, understanding each of the actors’ influence and effect in an assemblage enables participants to work alongside nonhuman technological tools.

An Analysis of Two Examples from Nepal

Tucked between two giant nations, China and India, Nepal shut its southern borders as early as March 2020, the year the country was celebrating the “Visit Nepal 2020” tourism campaign to boost the tourism industry⁴. With a population of 30 million, the tourism industry and remittance⁵ contribute a big chunk to the country’s economy (Sah et. al 2020, p. 2). The country imposed a nationwide lockdown that lasted for four months. A year later, when COVID cases were at their highest in India and vaccine equity seemed like a distant dream for the majority of Nepal⁶, the Nepal government proposed another lockdown in late April 2021. As the demands

⁴The campaign that started in January 2020 was projected to attract 2 million tourists in the country. Nepal’s Tourism industry in 2018 accounted for 7.9% of the GDP.

⁵Remittance accounts for a quarter of the country’s GDP.

⁶Till mid-May 2021, it was reported that only one percent of the population received the double doses of vaccine. Comparatively, in the U.S by April’s end, at least 200 million vaccines had been administered. As of Dec 22, 2021,

for ICU beds, ventilators, and oxygen tanks surged⁷, accessing timely information about these critical medical needs became indispensable, pushing proactive Nepali netizens to network and disseminate information online for achieving information and health justice. In contrast, the Nepali government was occupied with its internal political affairs⁸ and concerned about its survival. In the meantime, Nepali netizens utilized social media technologies and messaging apps to connect and distribute information about medical necessities and COVID-19 resources. Nepali netizens, working alongside the affordances of these technologies, effectively collaborated and crowdsourced information for those experiencing COVID-19 emergencies and for those searching for information about COVID-19.

During a disaster and post-disaster, mobility of people and response and rescue networks are impacted. Grassroots interventions for tactical risk communications can fill in the gaps created within official strategies. As Ding (2009) posits, although social media and guerrilla media are considered alternative media, they still are crucial tools in facilitating “tactical extra-institutional risk communication” (p. 330), circumventing official silence, and decentralizing information sharing. Amidst the information drought created by officials⁹, a few groups of like-minded youth groups and activists—whom we have identified as grassroots risk communicators—started collaborating online to build risk communication portals and information sources. As tweets asking for medical information support—similar to Figures 1 and 2—became more rampant, grassroots risk communicators started mobilizing available resources to provide help. The following sections will grapple with two examples to understand how grassroots communicators collaborated alongside social media technologies to connect and crowdsource life-saving information. Communicated through social media and messaging apps, specifically Viber and Twitter, these grassroots interventions established risk communication assemblages that enabled transnational connections, which provided information to Nepali citizens seeking help. Moreover, the affordances of these technologies allowed grassroots communicators to set up platforms to distribute information about COVID-19 cases, hospital patient numbers, and resources about medical facilities.

Example I: Viber Group Chat and Immaterial Labor

Since the onset of the 2020 outbreak of the virus and subsequent first lockdown March 24 to July 21, 2020, the rhetoric of personal narratives and struggles about living during the pandemic spread across Nepali social media. A year later, after going into a nationwide second lockdown, the grassroots risk communicators co-opted and transformed the same space for providing more than personal narratives. Employing readily available means of communication such as social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, chatting apps like Viber, and creating specific hashtags proved to be efficient ways to reach a targeted audience to crowdsource and distribute life-saving information. A Viber group chat dubbed as “COVID-19 Emergency Group” was created on the same day as the second lockdown kicked off. One of the creators tweeted (as seen in Figure 3) the news about the launching of the Viber group chat. The intention behind this was to provide a

32.81% have been fully vaccinated in Nepal with no plan for booster doses whereas in the US, 30 percent of the population have received a booster dose.

⁷Compared to 200 new cases at the start of April, there were 8,600 new cases by month’s end. It is also crucial to note that positive cases were much higher, but unreported.

⁸In May, the president of Nepal dissolved the House of Representatives, the second instance in five months, throwing the country into political disarray. The house had been dissolved in December 2020 by the Prime Minister who called for snap polls to be held in April and May the following year.

⁹The Nepal government and public health and clinical experts including the Ministry of Health and Population.

comprehensive platform for service seekers to assist them in accumulating information pertaining to COVID-19 emergencies. Within a month, the group was able to draw 21,000 members (as seen in Figure 4). Co-founded by public health graduates¹⁰, the platform functioned in a collaborative way with 2,000 active members constantly answering public queries about oxygen tanks, IUC beds, and hospitals admitting COVID patients (Chaudhary, 2021). The group's co-creators shared the common concern that while COVID-19 cases were surging in the neighboring country¹¹, the Nepal government was hard-pressed about its own inter-governmental squabble (Pattison, 2021). In those desperate times, the public resorted to social media to seek help and answers to survive. Prashikchhya Parajuli—one of the co-creators of the group who at the time also worked as a data assistant to WHO-Nepal—recalled the desperation and stories of resilience: “everyone is doing their best from their own side. Even those who have lost loved ones are still trying to help. It’s heart-wrenching” (Pattison, 2021). This alternative route for risk communication reveals how “ad hoc coalitions of opposites of parties, regions, organizations, rebels, classes, and individuals shape society from below” (Ding, 2013, p.134). Employing their “immaterial labor,” Nepali online communities and members actively participated in grassroots risk communication and management activities.

Example 2: Twitter and Crowdsourcing

Luna Ranjit from COVID Alliance for Nepal¹², another volunteer-run crisis-response group expressed similar sentiments to Parajuli, arguing that, “[...] but if the government is not doing enough, we have to step-up” (Pattison, 2021). Ranjit brandished their urge to take initiative and dispense their labor for a social cause. Other than locating much-needed help and information about medical equipment via sites like Twitter, the COVID Alliance for Nepal was involved in vaccine justice and procurement campaigns¹³, launching a massive lobbying effort at the level of the US embassy in Nepal (Figure 5). It is critical to note here that the campaign came at a time when Bill Gates and other powerful pharma companies were vehemently lobbying to conceal vaccine recipes from factories in the developing world. Where capitalism and neoliberalism fail to deliver basic necessities in a timely fashion during a crisis, immaterial labor, as Ding posits, creates space to address the information vacuum through creative collaboration and intervention to create accountability, transparency, and collective rhetorical agency. Volunteer groups and Twitter participants disseminated information about various campaigns, and social media users (the public) started tagging and tweeting at the US Embassy¹⁴ in Nepal and other concerned government offices, retweeting critical information shared on the platform about the need and supply of medical care. Oftentimes these groups were channeling and disseminating information gathered from personal contacts and networking with health care providers and ministries through decentralized and dispersed communication platforms. This process can be called crowdsourcing, which Ding (2020) defines as involving monodirectional, bidirectional, or multidirectional communication involving collective efforts of online communities to solve certain problems (p. 144).

Crowdsourcing and online activism came as a boon during the pandemic, where social distancing and lockdowns were the new normal. One example of this immaterial labor in action is

¹⁰ The graduate students work at the Department of Health Services.

¹¹ India and Nepal share an open border system.

¹² <https://alliance4nep.github.io/>

¹³ <https://www.change.org/p/ambassador-randy-berry-get-COVID-vaccines-to-nepal-asap-and-prevent-a-humanitarian-disaster>

¹⁴ For more info: <https://np.usembassy.gov/fact-sheet-u-s-COVID-19-assistance-to-nepal-to-date/>

demonstrated in the tweet by Abhinash Pandey, a member of COVID Connect (Figure 6). Pandey calls for others to crowdsource information that could provide life-saving equipment to those in need. Tagging @COVID_nepal, Pandey leads users to a database of collected information on the COVID-19 crisis in Nepal (Pandey, 2021b). Through the immaterial labor dispersed through social media networking, Nepali citizens collaborated on social media sites and shared information, in turn practicing crowdsourcing¹⁵ and both tenets of interactional justice— informational justice and interpersonal justice.

We would like to close this section by revisiting our examples and exploring the dimensions of immaterial labor and interactional justice manifested in the social media rhetorics of Nepali Twitter participants during April 2021. As we move through this analysis, it is paramount to remember that the information we are suggesting that is being countered has more to do with the ideoscapes and hegemonic beliefs that proliferate about American exceptionalism and the intelligence of non-Western countries than what Bill Gates explicitly proclaims. The grassroots communication that we discuss/discussed has evolved out of the information and resource vacuum created by manufactured vaccine scarcity as a result of the ideoscapes propagated by Gates about IPRs. Thus, we are interested in knowing how Nepali netizens use immaterial labor and interactional justice to counter deficiency narratives about non-Western countries. In the analysis below, we apply Liza Potts' (2013) social media analytical framework to illustrate the generative potential that social media tools offer grassroots communicators during a disaster. We combine our use of Ding's analysis of immaterial labor and Potts' social media analytic to better highlight how the immaterial labor produced by grassroots communicators circulated and was disseminated online through nonhuman agents.

Understanding Social Media Assemblages

In the post-H5N1 avian flu virus world, “many governments have some kind of pandemic plan in place [...However,] during a severe pandemic, there is only so much they can do. Much of the response will depend on local communities taking action for themselves” (“Between a Virus,” 2009). This leaves community members to take the initiative during a crisis. Official interventions and support mechanisms take time to reach the community because of bureaucratic hurdles and unforeseen causes. Communal responsibility and a shared sense of urgency at the community level have been displayed during crises. Quoting a CDC report, Ding (2013) argues for “shared responsibility” at not only policy and official levels but also at “local and individual levels” (p. 135). While in Western societies’ “individualist culture” (Margison, 2020) took primacy over communal needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically post-vaccine roll-out, in non-Western countries like Nepal, community members came together to form coalitions to address local needs.

¹⁵ However there is a limitation to what extent these crowdsourcing, risk communication and communication networks can function during a health crisis. Also dubbed as “the first Post-truth Pandemic” (Parmet & Paul, 2020), COVID-19 has exposed the intricate effects of misinformation on public health. Erupting from various volcanic misinformation sources, the flow of misinformation is not linear, but rather this post-truth phenomenon, as Parmet (2020) points out, is both top-down (political leaders/policy makers to public) and bottom up (public to political leaders/policy makers). While social media may function as sites of networking and community building in times of crisis, they also become breeding grounds for spreading viral misinformation and creating “a climate of distrust” (Parmet & Paul, 2020, p. 945). While this article explores how grassroot communicators utilize social media to dispel post-truth myths and crowdsource information to aid Nepali citizens, we want to be clear that we understand how disinformation, misinformation, and fake news has exacerbated the public health crisis we are still currently living with. Even more specifically, we understand how misinformation has stalled vaccination rates in the US.

Delanda (2016) argues that communities can form alliances or coalitions, and they emerge with both limitations and opportunities capable of providing resources to their members. Adopting DIY (Do It Yourself) approaches for online communication, grassroots communication initiators contributed to inviting and forming alliances to create and curate databases to fill in the information deficiency vacancy left by the official leaders. For instance, The COVID Alliance for Nepal, referenced above, engaged in a public health campaign to appeal to the US embassy for vaccines for Nepal. The alliance created the hashtag #vaccines4Nepal, thus amplifying their message through the use of hashtagging and social media. The tweet in Figure 5 particularly demonstrates that the public health campaign was effective in reaching the US (The COVID Alliance, 2021b). Importantly, as an example of immaterial labor, specifically communicative and affective labor, the alliance not only strives to practice information and interpersonal justice by sharing truthful information but also endeavors to engage in affective labor through a call for Nepali users to share their personal stories with COVID to “show the public face of the COVID crisis in Nepal.” The alliance asks that users who choose to share their personal stories tag the appropriate governing bodies in Nepal and the US to encourage transnational grassroots communication efforts (The COVID Alliance, 2021a). This example of “communicative labor and affective labor, both mediated by language, produce[s] collaborative creativity and intervention, invite[s] social cooperation and coordination, and ultimately influence[s] public opinions and official policies” (Ding, 2019, p. 265). In using the hashtag, the COVID Alliance attempts to accomplish all three tenets of immaterial labor Ding outlines above. They invite social collaboration through the use of a hashtag to amplify their cause. The alliance asks Nepali social media users to share their personal stories and experiences with COVID-19, inviting collaboration and creativity. And, finally, the alliance tries to influence public opinion through their messaging that reaches US policymakers.

As evidenced by the labor produced by the COVID Alliance for Nepal, when faced with the disaster, grassroots communicators in Nepal began transforming from online users to online participants interested in engaging in material responses to the disaster. Potts (2013) critical framing of technical communication during crisis describes how some participants take on leadership roles. With this in view, we demonstrate how some online users in Nepal transformed themselves into active participants during the pandemic, making use of available communication tools and platforms. Unlike professional and official crisis communicators employed by government and institutions, volunteer actors as Potts (2013) recognizes, are unprepared but quickly attempt “to react to participants” (p. 38) within the networks. When a wave of social media users in Nepal started making posts seeking help regarding treatment for COVID-19, numerous users stepped up to provide valuable information. During the height of the second wave, posts like the one showcased in figures 1 and 2 swarmed Twitter and other social media sites, exposing the fragile health care system of the country.

According to Potts (2013), “participants are linking together multiple systems to forage for information and distribute knowledge” (p. 20). For instance, within our examples, while much of the communication and resource gathering occurred on Twitter, tweets frequently included external links to sites like <https://www.instagram.com/COVID.np/?hl=en> (<https://COVIDconnectnp.org>) and <https://COVIDnepal.org/faq>. These sites provided further information on data and statistics about hospitals and COVID-19 cases as well as resources on what to do if you have COVID-19 and where to find testing. Tweets also linked to external google docs that collected information on medical doctors who could volunteer their time and where to find hospital beds and oxygen tanks. @COVID_nepal crowdsourced information to collect and distribute on Twitter and through the website COVIDconnectnp.org. The organization used multiple platforms to

crowdsource and circulate information, including Change.org petitions, links to google docs, and external links to their website that also collected crowdsourced information. Thus, knowledge circulation includes “porous states through which content can move as details change” (Potts, 2013, p. 24), given that each of these systems and social networks relies on the other for the circulation, distribution, and crowdsourcing of information. To fully grapple with the extent of dispersed immaterial labor across various social webs and through multiple technologies, it’s necessary to utilize a framework that considers how participants used social media platforms in ways beyond the original design and the intention of social media platform designers to link to other sites and resources where participants can distribute information, crowdsource information and resources, and collaborate.

Our examples demonstrate that participants leveraged various social web tools to distribute and circulate information about COVID-19 and healthcare resources. These social web tools enabled the circulation of google docs with information about hospital beds and finding oxygen tanks, elicited phone numbers from doctors and other healthcare professionals, and provided resources about what to do if you are exposed to COVID-19. Importantly, the distribution of these resources and information relied on various social web tools. Specifically, we use social web tools to encapsulate the various communicative tools employed in distributing information. Social media sites like Twitter allow users to link and preview external sites and enable the quick dispersal of information to an array of transnational social media users creating assemblages that enable participants to efficiently disperse pertinent information. These nonhuman technologies work alongside human participants to circulate information in ways beyond the original design of social media platforms.

Given the use of multiple technologies discussed above, social web tools like retweeting offer a generative site of analysis to observe how nonhuman actors enable the efficient distribution of life-saving information during a disaster. For instance, COVID Alliance for Nepal engaged in circulating petitions and information about appealing to state representatives at the US embassy in Nepal to solicit information and resources for combatting COVID-19. Posting on Twitter about the circulation of campaigns created on Change.org and encouraging other social media participants to retweet these petitions resulted in over 40,000 signatures. This example demonstrates the necessity of taking an ecological approach to social media assemblages, especially considering the ways that human and nonhuman actors work alongside each other. The alliance created and circulated the petition on social media sites like Twitter. Retweeting enabled the petition to circulate to transnational audiences. The #vaccines4Nepal used by the alliance circulated the petition even further to those interested in achieving vaccine justice. Working alongside technological tools in use on Twitter, participants linked Change.org petitions to their tweets to enable users to easily access petitions. Each actor in the assemblage enabled the distribution and circulation of information that then spread to transnational audiences, as evidenced by the signatories who created the petition and those who then signed the petition via Change.org.

Moreover, hashtags also offer a site of analysis for understanding communicative flows of information circulation online. Hashtagging, in particular, enables “actors to conduct activities that reinforce the network, such as repeatedly sharing information (e.g., hashtags on Twitter) and connecting actors to each other by linking content” Potts (2013, p. 28). Participants analyzed above used #COVIDNepal to seek out resources. #COVIDNepal demonstrates many tweets where users seek out healthcare resources and information. Many of these pleas for help were met with other social media participants supplying information about numbers to call for help or providing external links to the COVIDconnectnp.org page where participants could find additional infor-

mation and resources. Organizations like COVID Connect were able to use hashtags to identify social media users in need of help and distribute information accordingly. Recognizing the vital role and agency that hashtags hold in this given assemblage is important for understanding how disaster organizations like COVID Connect were able to distribute and circulate information to those in need effectively.

Conclusion

Our World in Data¹⁶ has reported that as of May 2022, 60.5% of the world population has been fully vaccinated. From the beginning of the pandemic to the present, the world has watched COVID-19 wreak havoc on global healthcare systems. Similarly, critiques of Gates' rhetoric around intellectual property and vaccines should garner more attention on social media and at international policy-making levels. The rise of the Omicron¹⁷ variant in December of 2021 invigorated calls on social media to waive intellectual property strongholds over vaccine blueprints. But is it enough to address waiving IPRs for vaccines when the next pandemic hits?

A video by Karan Menon (Figure 7), a comedian and an avid social media content creator, points to the absurdity of the US's failure to go against billionaires and waive intellectual property rights over vaccines. In a video that was viewed 2.7 million times, liked 119,800 times, and shared 47,000 times, Menon pokes fun at capitalistic and neoliberal arguments that support upholding intellectual property rights over vaccine equity. Menon emphasizes the absurdity of this logic in his tweet, which insists that the Omicron variant demonstrates what happens when rich nations hoard vaccines and refuse to allow other countries to create and distribute their own vaccines (Menon, 2021). Menon's video points to the necessity and urgency of realizing how national governments and technocrats utilize inaccuracies and falsities about neoliberal practices like intellectual property rights to propagate myths that ultimately increase their net worth. But, more essentially, Menon, and the Nepali netizens and alliances that we discussed above, demonstrate the power social media holds in countering deficiency narratives. While social media has undoubtedly increased the circulation and amplification of certain disinformation tropes like deficiency narratives, we hope that this article demonstrates how grassroots communicators counter these myths by working alongside nonhuman technological actors.

By drawing on grassroots risk communication examples from Nepal, we introduce a perspective in the field of TPC that recognizes the importance of analyzing local resistance and grassroots communication in TPC. More research is still needed to aptly demonstrate the positive impacts of risk communication on social media and the ways in which these practices can teach us about conducting and theorizing social justice practices in communities with limited means and resources. Additionally, we end here by arguing that the West must take accountability and consider how a social justice praxis and pedagogy can call attention to these issues.

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¹⁶ Registered in England and Wales, Our World in Data is a scientific online publication which also documents global data and statistics about COVID-19.

¹⁷ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has warned that COVID-19 variants are highly expected in future.

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Appendix



Figure 1. A Twitter user seeks information about requiring an ICU bed for a patient arriving in Kathmandu.



Figure 2. Another Twitter user seeks help in locating Remdesivir for treating a COVID-19 patient.



Figure 3. A Twitter user–grassroot risk communicator–announces the creation of Viber group chat: “COVID-19 Emergency” on April 29, 2021, to help the public with accessing information about medical supply.



Figure 4. The same Twitter user, as shown in Figure 3, shares on May 28, 2021, that after a month of creating the group chat, it has garnered 21,000 member participants. The figure also shows that the group chat now has a blue check, which means it is a verified account by Viber. Verification gives more authenticity and amasses public trust.



Figure 5. On May 7, 2021, COVID Alliance for Nepal tweets that the U.S. Embassy Nepal has conveyed the group's request to the decision-makers in Washington, D.C., for providing vaccines in Nepal.

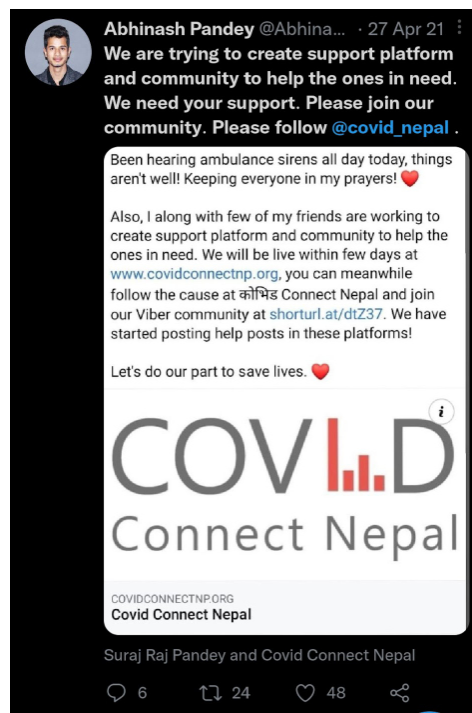


Figure 6. A Twitter user shares that they are creating a support platform called COVID Connect Nepal and asks the public to join the community if they need assistance seeking medical information.

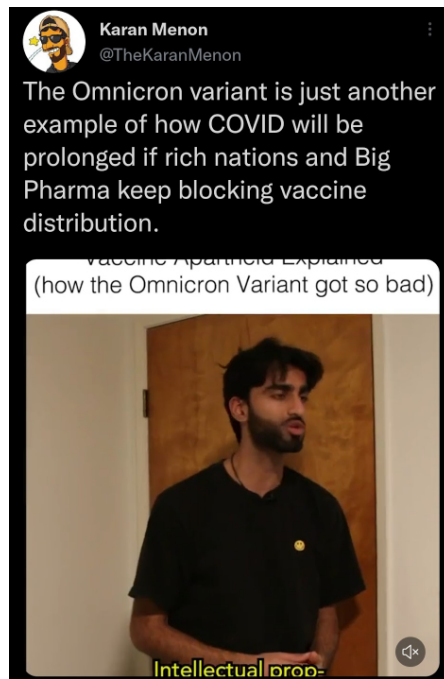


Figure 7. Karan Menon tweets his TikTok in which the creator through his skit show-cases how the global leaders are creating vaccine apartheid in the world.

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